MEN POETS' NUMBER

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY

Europa by Rolfe Humphries – – – – – – –

Poems by Mark Van Doren, George O'Neil and E. Merrill Root

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The Measure

A Journal of Poetry

NUMBER 41 JULY, 1924

Europa

THE party was no good again!
Only the brilliant girls redeemed
A dull and tedious affair:
What was the matter with the men?
To her, at least, they always seemed
Embarrassed or, perhaps, afraid,
Polite, intelligent, and thin,
Never a bull-necked savage there;
So she came home and went to bed.

Exasperated, she undressed,
Shook back her hair, and tumbled in,
Pulled up the sheet again, and pressed
Its chilly edge against her breast—
She wanted so to be possessed,
And she had really never been.
Her body's manufactured ache
Kept her half-sleeping, half-awake.

She listened to the big old boats,
The ponderous deliberate hulls
Whose hoarse and raucous whistle-notes
Set up a pounding in her pulse:
They were not boats, they were not boats,
They were not boats at all, but bulls
With red and thunder-swollen throats,
They were not boats, they were not boats—

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She suddenly switched on the light,
Looked at her body in the light,
Her slender body, slim and white,—
They were not boats at all, but bulls!—
She could not stand it any more,
She flung the bedclothes on the floor,
Swung herself half-around, and rose,
Hurried and firm, put on her clothes,
Slipped down the stairs and out the door.

Out in the street, she heard the blare
More nakedly across the air.
Each bull was bawling to his cow
More softly now, more softly now
Each lowing urgent bull besought her. . .
She turned her footsteps toward the water.

And when she reached the water-front
She saw her monster, huge and blunt;
She saw the shiny river rise
Up to the level of his eyes,
He had his secrets hidden in
The water, and he did not stir,
Firm in his rut he waited her.

She dipped her fingers in the flood,
She dipped her fingers to the wrist,
Oh, what a pounding in her blood!
The water sipped and sucked and hissed
Against the fragile, paper-thin,
Red-hot sheet-metal of her skin,
Preliminary, cool, caressed
The burning nipples of her breast
As, glad because she could not swim,
She started wading out to him.

—*Rolfe Humphries.*

Tableau

You never knew I loved you: you became
So eagerly solicitous to hold
Your own heart up to me and let its flame
Of ruddy ardor ward away the cold.....

So like two statues, each, who cannot take
The thing the other offers, here we stand;
Or like two blind boys, for each other's sake
Reaching a lantern out in either hand.

—Robert L. Wolf

The Four Cows

IF you should ask which way to go,
My friend, indeed, I'd scarcely know
Just how to tell you. Hm, let's see . . .
The weather-vane is rather free—
Points with the wind—that wouldn't do
To guide a man of sense like you.
You've got to be somewhere tonight!
And only one direction's right,
And all the rest are wrong! Of course!
Lord, if you only rode a horse!
A man on horseback always knows
His way, no matter which wind blows. . .

Afoot, alone, and only me,
In this lost land beside the sea,
At hand to guide you. Pray to God,
My friend, unless you'd feel too odd;
Pray to the demon of this hill—
They say the devil's with us still.
Though, if you're proud, why, better not—
For Disbelief's a power, too. You ought
Not risk it. Why not ask the cows?
Look, you can see them where they browse—
Four of them, all gentle and content,
Sober and sleek, their lives well spent,
Munching and mooing. One points west
Lowing the sunset. Does your quest
Lie that way? Standing rump to rump,
The heifer rubs against a stump,
And gazes eastward, where the moon,
Spending her silver mercy, soon
Will tread her path across the sky.
The third cow stands amid the rye,
Facing the mountain toward the south,
Quietly munching. In her mouth
A wisp of straw. Your way lies there
Perhaps, as well as anywhere;
Unless it be due north, where lies
The sea, that in the fourth cow's eyes
Floats mirrored, unctuous and calm.

There are four ways. Well, well, which one?
You've got to choose! That's just the fun
Of it. He! He! And those four cows
Will stand all day and never rouse,
Each pointed diff'rent, all so sure—
You see, their stupid hearts are pure.
Or is it that the cattle dare
Not to be going anywhere?

—*James Rorty*

To a Child with Eyes

FOOTPRINTS now on bread or cake
Merely are what a mouse can make.
You cannot open any door
And find a brownie on the floor,
Or, in the window where he went,
A fork, a spoon, a finger-dent.
Farmers climbing from the mow
Surprise no imp beneath a cow—
Milking madly! Breakfast bells
Are never tinkled from dry wells.
The commonwealth is gone that shut
Its felons in a hazel-nut.
Forests are no longer full
Of fairy women who can pull
A leaf around them, and can dance
Upon the very breath of plants.
River-rocks are bare of men
Who wring their beards and dive again. . . .
Is there nothing left to see?
There is the squirrel. There is the bee.
There is the chipmunk on the wall,
And the first yellow every fall.
There is the humming-bird, the crow.
There is the lantern on the snow.
There is the new-appearing corn.
There is the colt a minute born. . . .
Run and see, and say how many—
There are more if there is any!

Immortal

THE last thin acre of stalks that stood
Was never the end of the wheat.
Always something fled to the wood,
As if the field had feet.

In front of the sickle something rose—
Mouse, or weasel, or hare;
We struck and struck, but our worst blows
Dangled in the air.

Nothing could touch the little soul
Of the grain. It ran to cover,
And nobody knew in what warm hole
It slept till the winter was over,

And early seeds lay cold in the ground.
Then—but nobody saw—
It burrowed back with never a sound,
And awoke the thaw.

—Mark Van Doren

Nude

FROM what mysterious seas,
What iridescent shell,
Did diving men release
This rounded miracle.
Those waters are deviceless now;
Reft of that pearl;
And I have what is priceless now,
The likeness of a girl.

—Kenneth Slade Alling

Two in the Twilit Orchard

THE race is damned, tonight I know .
Here is the curse against your cheek.
This way, ten thousand years ago,
God made his image meek:

Poor Adam with his nervous tongue,
And Eve stark naked at his side,
Beneath a tree whose branches hung
The first time glorified,
Stood staring while two skylarks mated
Above them in a frozen cloud;
And God, behind a lilac waited,
Benevolent and proud,
And bade the dusk stand by awhile
To keep the apple branches gold
And paint the valley for a mile
That Eve might still be bold.
But suddenly he frowned. A thrush
Broke off its song. Eve bent her head—
God gripped the purple lilac bush—
"How beautiful!" she said.

And Adam turned and looked at her,
Then peered again into the tree;
And neither heard far thunder stir.
But night fell suddenly.

—George O'Neil

Thus:

WINDWARD of the rood the white cloud rose,
Shadowward hove the vulture,
Earthward bowed the only well-poised Jew
Introducing culture.

—David Greenhood.

Saturday Barnyard

THE hen marks hieroglyphs upon the ground
With rapid claws, pausing to scrutinize
Until the rooster, wheeling swiftly round
Struts proudly up, beholds with staring eyes,
Pecks his approval, turns, and lingering, looks
To form conclusions, as one reads in books
A secret. Did he note and ponder then
How she by night would be a headless hen?

—*Prescott Hoard.*

Stubborn

WHEN an eagle asks his way
Of a barnyard hen, I may
Turn my tiger soul to ask
Ox souls for my law and task.

And I shall fancy that I ought
To change my lonely, stubborn thought
When the oak feels shame that he
Is no serving apple-tree.

I shall stop or change my song
When the bush thinks roses wrong,
And bears plump and useful peas,
Beans or curly cabbages!

Monkeys

THROUGH the Amazonian day,
Climbing shaggy trunks in play,
Liana-swinging to and fro,
Chewing hunks of nut they go
(Teasing brothers with their tails—
Hairy and prehensile flails.)
And they rout, in screaming shock,
A gorgeous, great-beaked parrot-flock;
Or they pelt, with nut and knot
A smoulder-spotted ocelot.
Next they seek for golden fruit
With Hurrah and monkey bruit,
Crunching it as they careen
Crazily across the green;
Or they find, for monkey lunch,
Warm round parrot eggs to crunch.
And when they've had enough to eat
Branchy tree-top love is sweet:
Trembling little arms can curl
Warm about a monkey girl.
Thus they chatter, feast and scratch. . . .
And if a jaguar should snatch
With his dagger-taloned hand
A hairy brother from their band
Very soon the bright fear dies
From their happy, shallow eyes.

—E. Merrill Root

If You Are A Man

In our country men have been almost anything before being artists. Let us summarize: it is hard to be an artist under any circumstance; it is harder in America than it has been at other stations in time and space; but hardest of all, multiplied by fractions, decimals and whole numbers, to be an artist in this country *if you are a man*. Perhaps this is said just as it is ceasing to be true. This number of the *Measure* will, I hope, explain itself and write the significant part of my editorial. If the signs are not all awry, in spite of business careers, masculine responsibility, babies, wives and the *mores* of respectable America, we shall have poets among the men who will write in as vivid and dominant a manner as have the more fortunate women.

But if we do it will be a strenuous miracle, for the following reasons. Three or four figures stand out against a background of dejected craftsmen. The background divides itself roughly into the following classes: First, the writers of a careless reportorial free-verse, very virile, with a swagger to cover up poor technique, and chewing-tobacco manners. Then the exotics, usually found in the south and middle-west, where the corn-and-cotton soul yearns for Beardsley and Baudelaire, or their modern equivalents. Then the more-feminine-than-the-women poets concerned with the moon, the sea, a sea-gull, and nothing whatsoever. Then the producers of a dull, decent, objective verse, usually derived from the uninspired part of Frost, which employs material befitting manly dignity, such as berry-picking and milking-time. All these groups give a sense of locked-up talent, denied and outcast desire—but almost never a poem. The composite photograph is hardly an image of the modern man, if we remember *Three Soldiers* and *The Enormous Room*. Those of us who know a large number of struggling men who have often it appears, much more talent than the women, but almost never a poem to be placed with their best, see for them one terrible problem in common: the problem of earning a living. Not merely a living for one, unless the man so determines to simplify matters. Bread and butter for an average three or four change the picture enormously.

The problem has intangible difficulties that must be attacked like

Banquo's ghost, long after some disposal of Banquo himself is made. Even with the solution in dollars and cents, there remains a cloudy weight of guilt for that vagabond in our commonwealth who does not observe the custom of going daily to an office where he pretends importance, whether useful or not. The creative boy must purge himself of the slow poisons of middle-class morality before he can render himself pure for the work of an artist. And this is no small thing to do. It keeps him shadow-boxing and arguing eternally trying to convince himself that the white-collar slave is not really a better man than he.

England sees no moral splendor in making a man waste eight hours each day before he turns to the labor of his spirit; and for this reason, as much as any other, England's sons achieve greatness where our men, afraid of lay opinion, attempt to combine the almost fatal masculine virtue of breadwinning with the production of authentic literature. Remember the patrons of the Elizabethans. Remember the fathers of Browning and Shelley, Keats' brothers and Shaw's mother and wife. Lacking these right minded people we should have had withered, distraught scribbling, in place of the broad and mature beauty, the passionate finality, and the ruthless wisdom of these idle men.

Now the writing of even one good sonnet often brings about an entire indifference to jobs, including the loss of them, and with the instinct to protect their dependents, men have known this and avoided the pitfalls of unleashed creative indulgence. Hence they write like amateurs; real troubles, very humanly, are avoided since there seems to be small remedy.

But men have carefully avoided writing great poetry for an equally crushing, though less material reason. Personal intensities, poems given in the first person singular, are of course bad taste for slaves. Women have long been allowed the luxury of souls, along with freedom from economic pressure; men who live within its circle night and day are urged to look to optimism and the good dull outdoors, in their art. How else is society to remain stable? In the cases where this taboo is lifted and the man says 'My heart is broken and I could die of grief,—(But never fear, darling, I won't. I'll keep on working')—a blurred and softened pianissimo is evident. Men are supposed to like politics, books of travel, biographies of re-

tired statesmen and any safe external that is not too closely associated with feeling. The womanly woman has vanished, and we are richer for her going, but the manly man runs about in literature, the worst bore yet invented.

And still our loss is hard to measure. Edwin Arlington Robinson is an example of a poet who grew up in an age that forbad even more severely than ours, the recording of the soul's events, and we have in consequence, many excellent objective anecdotes and portraits, through which the urge for direct expression was forced to go. In his case we may be no less well off to possess *Richard Corey, Flammonde, King Cole,* and *Miniver Cheevy,* but with many other poets we have not been so fortunate. Sandburg is for me, the author of *Bringers* and *Handfuls;* I am sure that many of his other poems have been off the line of his true progress. Frost is said to like, of all his poems, one short lyric best, and to have remarked knowingly that he was aware, also, that 'You couldn't make a reputation on such lyrics.' In spite of exceptions, and excluding certain ostensibly impersonal poems which contain a sublimated intensity all the more beautiful for the prohibition, the men's work on the whole shows the ill effects of the prejudice against any passionate personal statement. It is here we hope for a change.

Through all these shades of perils, material and spiritual, the man who would write, must come. Like a prisoner running the gauntlet, he must take many heavy blows, and by some miracle, although crippled, survive.

—*Genevieve Taggard*

On The Right, Ladies and Gentlemen . . .

Tulips and Chimneys, by E. E. Cummings. Seltzer.

IT is disconcerting to be compelled to revise one's opinions, and I owe Mr. E. E. Cummings at least two grudges on that score.

When I first read a poem of his—it was *Orientale* in the present volume—we were in college together, with a bare bowing acquaintance across the Yard, and I immediately went out and voted for him for Class Poet, and urged everyone I met to do the same. *Orientale* was published in the *Harvard Monthly,* that fertile organ which has given birth successively to the *New Republic* and the *Dial,* and

the poem was printed like any other poem, reading from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom, and with scansion, spelling, punctuation, and grammar quite according to the rules of the English Department.

A war and a few other things intervened, and Mr. Cummings was no more heard of, until one day he broke out like a new kind of typographical measles in the *Dial*.

This time not only did all his lines begin with small letters, but even the word "i" was not capitalized, whole stanzas consisted of nothing but commas, and the words were spattered over the page in a manner irregular in the extreme. The effect, of course, was to set everyone talking of the new poet—those who disliked eccentricity for its own sake with irritation, and the Others with admiration and delight.

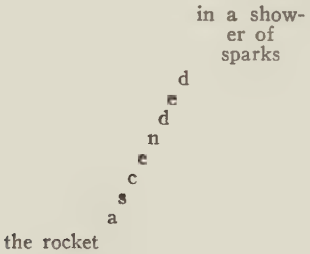
Now in this we were unjust to Mr. Cummings, as the present volume abundantly makes clear. The usual thing to say of *Tulips and Chimneys* is that it contains a great deal of good poetry, in spite of the extraordinary character of its style. Some old bell-wether—I believe it was *Vanity Fair* a year or so ago—led off with this declaration; Mr. Gorman in the *Times* followed, and one after another the critical sheep were gone, bobbing over the fences in their rear.

A simple experiment is enough to test the validity of this issue. Persons who have heard Carl Sandburg read his poems must agree that his medium is not the printed page at all—he should circulate only on phonograph records. But a reading of Mr. Cummings at once demonstrates that his medium is solely and exclusively the printed page. In speech, half his qualities vanish—some of his pieces fall flat altogether, others, like the luscious and delicate *Puella Mea,* retain their major charm; most of them become melodious and slightly conventional poems in the style of pre-Elizabethan verse. Return to type, and an impish delight peers out from behind each syllable, every comma twists its tail and scurries away down amusing vistas, solemn semicolons join hands and waltz off with the imagination. The poems read themselves—or perhaps skim rather than read, with extreme nimbleness, and in a sort of mental undertone. Every eccentricity fits into its place—small i's strut with their tongues in their cheeks and their hands in their pockets, snaky sibilants

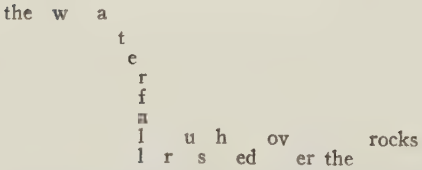
uncoil and hiss for a second at the intruder. A peculiar line swing that does not consist in pauses, really, nor in oral stress, but in a kind of minor, delicate, ocular accentuation, dips in and out and expresses itself in most quaint and exquisite harmony by the unusual placing of these words on the page.

In producing these effects, to be sure, Mr. Cummings is not perhaps merely a poet—he has invented a new form of entertainment—he is a linotype-sketcher, possibly, or a draughtsman in printer's ink. His art is more akin to that of the drum-major than to that of the drummer—he has succeeded, and for the first time in history, in freezing the gesture onto the printed page. Gifted in the plastic arts as well as in literature, he abandons the voice, with its single dimension, for the surface, which has length and breadth.

The new resources unfolded by this method are astonishing. If Mr. Cummings is describing a celebration, for example, he can say



—if a river,



But these are crude and insulting parodies, related to Mr. Cummings' poetry somewhat as the work of a sign-painter is to that of an etcher.

What he really does do is this in a portrait of a prostitute:

. . . opening the hard great

eyes to noone in particular she
gasped almost
loudly
i'm

so
drunG

k, dear

or this exquisite little poem about a star:

i was considering how
within night's loose
sack a star's
nibbling in-

fin
-i-
tes-
i
-mal-
ly devours

darkness the
hungry star
which
will e

-ven
tu-
al
-ly jiggle
the bait of
dawn and be jerked

into

eternity. when over my head a
shooting
star
Bur s

(t
into a stale shriek
like an alarm-clock)

The "translation" of either of these poems into ordinary copy would be an obvious sacrilege, in which nobody but those reviewers who were silly enough to try it, could possibly wish to share. No other method ever used would produce such a vivid and exciting result as the one Mr. Cummings has invented.

But the selection of certain passages to illustrate his more obvious effects, does a great injustice to the subtlety and whimsicality of the entire volume, as well as to certain of Mr. Cummings' qualities by no means dependent on his printer's care. There are parts of *Puella Mea* that are among the loveliest and most delicate erotic verse in the language, and if there is anywhere in modern poetry a more charming passage than the beginning of this lyric, I do not know it:

SONGS

II

Always before your voice my soul
half-beautiful and wholly droll
is as some smooth and awkward foal
whereof young moons begin
the newness of his skin,

Sweetness and limpidity, a certain delicious whimsicality, and a delight in rich and elaborate metaphor, are Mr. Cummings' chief qualities, underneath all his cloak of sophistication. Indeed I think the cloak of sophistication has been donated chiefly by his critics. His material is impartially phantasies of fine ladies, or swift miniatures of prostitutes—though he writes occasional poems about spring and fall and moonlight, he belongs with the poets of personal emotion, rather than with the Topographical or Climatic schools of verse. He is, in fact, the only poet I know, living or dead, who writes of prostitutes at once with tenderness and realism, and with hardly a grain of sentimentality, and I can do no better than close by quoting Sonnet VI in the first group, one of the finest poems of the book:

when thou has taken thy last applause, and when
the final curtain strikes the world away,
leaving to shadowy silence and dismay
that stage which shall not know thy smile again,
lingering a little while i see thee then
ponder the tinsel part they let thee play;
i see the large lips livid, the face grey,
and silent smileless eyes of Magdalen.
The lights have laughed their last; without, the street
darkling awaiteth her whose feet have trod
the silly souls of men to golden dust:
she pauses on the lintel of defeat,
her heart breaks in a smile—and she is Lust . . . .

mine also, little painted poem of god

—Robert L. Wolf

CONTRIBUTORS

ROLFE HUMPHRIES, who edited the *Little Anthology*, is one of the most interesting of the younger poets. He graduated from Amherst in 1915 and now coaches football and teaches mathematics and Latin at a day school in New York. His poetry, which has appeared in a wide variety of magazines, will be published in a volume this fall.

E. MERRILL ROOT, author of the much disputed article on Emily Dickinson and Amy Lowell in the May *Measure,* belongs—with ardent affiliations to Rolph Hodgson and William Blake—to the Dickinson line of New England poets. Mr. Root is also a teacher.

JAMES RORTY, author of *What Michael Said to the Census Taker,* is by his own description a San Francisco Ad. man.

GEORGE O'NEIL has been for several months at his home in St. Louis, and is now going to France for a period of intensive labor on his plays and poetry.

KENNETH SLADE ALLING, who is one of the chief workers in small and clean designs, has some of his best poetry in the recently published *Bowling Green Anthology of Verse,* compiled by Christopher Morley.

DAVID GREENHOOD edited the *Occident* of the University of California while in college. He is now instructor in English at Carnegie Tech, and associate editor of *Palms.*

PRESCOTT HOARD was introduced in the June number.

MARK VAN DOREN will become Literary Editor of the *Nation* when he returns from Europe in the fall. His book, to be published by Seltzer, will be called *Spring Thunder and Other Poems.*

ROBERT L. WOLF'S *Forgive Us Our Debts,* published in the June number, brought the *Measure* many letters and clippings.

The Measure

A Journal of Poetry

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